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# Philanthropy, Giving, and Development in Southeast Asia

Rosalia Sciortino

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## PHILANTHROPY – AN ELUSIVE AND CHANGING CONCEPT

This special issue on the evolving state of philanthropy in Southeast Asia provides an overview of the trends and tensions in this sector, which is being shaped by often conflicting notions of charity, development, and business.

Philanthropy is viewed as an age-old practice, yet not many are familiar with the term (Payton & Moody, 2008) and even fewer know its etymological origin from ancient Greek, literally meaning ‘love to humankind’. Classic definitions describe philanthropy as a private initiative for the public good (as cited by Gardner in McCully, 2008) or a voluntary action for the public good (Payton, 1988) aiming at improvement in the quality of human life (Bremner, 1988). These definitions, however, are quite broad and leave open to interpretation what philanthropy actually implies in specific contexts and settings. In trying to operationalize the concept, practitioners tend to take a narrower view of philanthropy centered on its financial dimension as implying a donation or investment of private capital for the public good. They further distinguish its purpose from that of ‘charity’ in that philanthropy is meant to focus on the prevention and elimination of the roots causes of social problems rather than merely alleviating the suffering caused by those same social problems. While charity is seen as directed at meeting immediate needs, philanthropy is expected to be ‘problem-solving’ and persistent in addressing society’s challenges. Its efforts do not provide immediate reprieve, but aim to enable disadvantaged people to gain the skills to improve their conditions while also creating opportunities for them to advance in society. In the words of Steve Gunderson, former President and CEO of the Council of Foundations: “Charity tends to be a short-term, emotional, immediate response, focused primarily on rescue and relief, whereas philanthropy is much more long-term, more strategic, focused on rebuilding” (The Melvin and Bren Simon Foundation, 2015).

This juxtaposition is inspired by the early Anglo-American philanthropists in the 20th century, foremost Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) and John D. Rockefeller (1839-1937), and in successive years, Henry Ford (1863-1947). The private foundations they, and successive generations of US philanthropists, established with substantial endowments and generous tax deductions for their donations, aim to address the root causes of social ills (Bremner, 1988; McCully, 2008; Zunz, 2010). As Rockefeller himself stated: “The best philanthropy is constantly in search of the finalities – a search for a cause, an attempt to cure evils at their

source” (Rockefeller, 1984; Seim, 2016 p. 54). US foundations working internationally, such as Ford, Charles Stewart Mott, Rockefeller, and W.K. Kellogg, have traditionally also confided in the “power and potential of philanthropy to address problems as well as to strengthen civil society and democracy” worldwide (Ambrose, 2005, p. 2).

In this philanthropic model, the allocation of endowed resources is institutionalized and professionalized, with foundation officers strategically granting to selected organizations whose concerted funded actions are meant to address a specific issue and bring about societal change in a context-specific and synergic manner. Going beyond spontaneous individual giving from one to another person or to a particular cause – which still constitutes the majority of giving in the US and elsewhere in the world – philanthropic resources are channeled through institutions to other institutions, mostly non-government and civil society groups. Here, a distinction is made between private and public foundations, the first being established with donations of philanthropist individuals or families, and the second being funded from various sources, including private donations and public funding. On the ground, this translates into a multitude of foundations of various sizes and modalities. The Foundation Center estimated that in the US alone in 2012 there were 86,192 foundations with USD 715 billion in assets and USD 52 billion in giving. The largest of these and the highest number (78,582) were independent foundations established by individual donors or families. The remaining could be classified as corporate, operational, and community foundations (Foundation Center, 2014, p. 3; see Table 1). If other kinds of organizations with an official non-profit status are included, the number reaches 1.4 million in the same year (Statista, 2017). Outside of the US, reliable numbers are lacking, also because legal systems and public opinion do not always distinguish the scope of foundation work from that of the larger nonprofit or civil society sector and different tax systems do not incentivize and thus also do not monitor philanthropic foundations. However, it is generally assumed that the third or non-profit sector is large and growing and home-grown philanthropy is expanding (Ambrose, 2005, p. 3; “Homegrown Philanthropy”, 2014).

Independent	Established by individual donors or donor families as separate legal entities are mainly engaged in grant-making activities
Operating	Primarily run their own programs, but some also make grants. Generally established by individual donors or donor families
Corporate	Established by businesses ranging from major corporations to family owned shops, as separate or semi-independent entities
Community	Raise funds from the public. Engage in grant-making primarily within a defined geographic area

Table 1. A typology of (philanthropic) foundations (Adapted from Foundation Center, 2014, p. 3; Martens & Seitz, 2015, p. 9)

Interestingly, the modality of foundations as non-profit is today being challenged by new conceptualizations of philanthropy that do no longer see this as one of the defining criteria. The rise in the last two decades of a more universalist, technocratic, and market-oriented approach in philanthropy – triggered by the establishment of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) – has emphasized the view that the commercial sector can serve as a model for the third sector in devising ‘global’ solution to development problems and that positive social and environmental outcomes as well as monetary gains can be pursued simultaneously. In the so-called venture philanthropy, branded by critics as ‘philanthrocapitalism’, donations or loans are given to organizations applying a commercial model like social enterprises and so-called social impact investments are made to seek social benefits as well as financial returns (Heude, 2010; Sciortino, this issue). While increasingly hailed by its proponents as the philanthropic model of the future, in contrast to the ‘traditional’, purely non-profit model of early foundations, this mixing of business and social purposes leaves open the question in how far ‘private gain’ can be considered ‘a public good’ for society and its most vulnerable groups (Kvangraven, 2016). More pragmatically it can be questioned in how far tax incentives that have been granted by states, particularly the US and North European countries, to incentivize charitable and philanthropic donations and to promote the establishment of non-profit foundations and organizations as recipients, should still apply. This at a time when as the Economist states “The idea that the state should subsidise giving to good causes is resilient, but not easily justified” (“Sweetened charity”, 2012).

The growing diversity of paradigmatic positions with its inherent tensions adds to the complexity of finding common ground among “private initiatives for the public good as diversely practiced around the globe” (Harvey, 2011). Societies show a wide range of “types and modes of philanthropy, of scope and funding purposes” often in contexts with poor differentiation of charity vis-à-vis philanthropy and the overall non-profit sector and with limited infrastructure and tax incentives, wherein “organized’ foundations are just one means for giving” (Ambrose, 2005, p. 1; Sciortino, this issue). To take this variety into account implies again an expansion of the conceptual boundaries to allow for an all-encompassing definition of ‘global philanthropy’ that:

incorporates both giving and doing and includes both the traditional and non-traditional, the formal and informal, the religious and the secular. [This definition] recognizes that, across the planet, diverse kinds of philanthropic practice emerge out of a particular set of factors: cultural, social, religious, economic, political, legal and more. All are valuable, and all are ‘philanthropy’. (Harvey, 2011)

Beside referring to the fast expansion of home-grown ‘local’ or ‘indigenous’ philanthropic practices worldwide in its various forms, global philanthropy is also commonly understood, especially among US-based organizations, to indicate that funds are directed at addressing causes across national borders either to international organizations operating overseas or to local organizations in foreign countries (Harvey, 2011). The increased use in the last decade of this term in its multiple interpretations is a reflection of an increasing recognition of the role of foundations, both international and ‘indigenous’ in international development.

## A GLOBAL DISCOURSE ON PHILANTHROPY AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In recent years, we have seen the emergence of a global discourse on the growing influence of philanthropic actors in international cooperation (Grady, 2014; OECD, 2017). Donor nations confronted with financial crises and taxpayers who have a diminished appetite for shouldering the costs of overseas aid, have started to take a closer look at the rapid increase of private flows from aid-donor countries to developing countries, in order of volume investments, remittances and philanthropy, and their actual and potential contribution to development. These private flows were estimated to account in 2014 for 85% of the overall economic interaction with “government aid represent[ing] only 15 percent of the total engagement, the reverse of some 40 years ago” (Hudson Institute, 2016). Convinced that “remittances and philanthropy continue to thrive and are important lifelines to the world’s poorest people” (Hudson Institute 2016, 2017), donor countries have welcomed private foundations as partners in international development efforts (Center for Global Prosperity & Hudson Institute, 2013; Grady, 2014; Hénou, 2014; OECD, 2014, 2017). Their governments have stressed the value of public-private partnerships, and argued that philanthropic foundations have comparative advantages of operational flexibility, consistency, innovation, and capacity to leverage funding. We are also reminded that that philanthropy should not be seen merely as “a ‘gap filler’ for ODA”, but should be appreciated for its concern for “under-funded sectors like social inclusion, human rights, and gender equality”, its building of new fields and networks, and for its added value to the non-profit sector “through the creation of grant-making portfolios that help build communities of practice, disciplinary fields, and social movements for positive change” (Grady, 2014, p. 5).

Among these rising expectations, philanthropic actors have been enlisted to contribute to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted at the 2015 UN Summit and to help realize the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aiming to “end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all” (United Nations [UN], 2015). OECD analysis based on current sectoral funding trends of North-South flows expects philanthropic resources to significantly contribute in helping developing countries achieve SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education), and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) (OECD, 2017).

The turn to private foundations and global philanthropy in international development has been prompted by the international work of foundations from OECD countries, especially from the U.S. The lion’s share of attention goes to the BMGF, whose endowment of USD 40.3 billion (BMGF, 2017) overshadows those of such older foundations with overseas interests as the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, which have endowments of USD 12 billion (Ford Foundation, 2017) and assets just above USD 4 billion (Rockefeller Foundation, 2017) respectively. According to OECD (2017), in the period 2013-2015, BMGF contributed 60% of the total USD 19.5 billion in philanthropic giving from OECD countries to developing countries with over 11 billion in grants mostly in the health, population, and agriculture sectors, followed by the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation, CIFF (4%), the Dutch Postcode Lottery (3%), the Ford Foundation (3%), and the IKEA Foundation (2%). American foundations were the large majority, with only 19% of the total originating from Europe and the remaining from India, Japan, Brazil, and Mexico.

The available data, skewed toward Western countries, underrepresent foundations in other parts of the world and fail to include philanthropic initiatives in lesser affluent locations. Yet the global discourse on philanthropy and development counts on the growing pool of local philanthropists in emerging economies to supply “a potentially better attuned and more sustainable income source for local humanitarian and development needs” (“Homegrown Philanthropy”, 2014). The expansion of home-grown philanthropy due to the greater economic concentration and polarization of wealth globally, changing fiscal spaces, and more integrated global systems is seen as a bonus at a time when the role of governments is changing and many are implementing austerity measures and downsizing the provision of social services. There is hope that these local sources will supplement or compensate for diminishing overseas aid assistance, while also providing more context-sensitive support. Global interest mainly focuses on China, India, and other countries at a similar stage of newly advanced economic development, but more and more there is also attention for poorer countries with well-off elites, especially in Africa.

This growing role of philanthropy in development, while hailed by governments and multi-lateral institutions and corporations, is not without critics. Most recently, the president of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Barbara Unmüßig (2017), asked: “[the] narrative of the well-meaning philanthropist taking on the world’s troubles may seem attractive, but should we accept it unquestioned?” She set alarm bells ringing about the global development agenda being decided by private donors who promote a “market-based approach, relying primarily on technical solutions to complex problems” that benefit the corporate sector, and make top-down decisions without engagement of civil society and local people and experts. She argues that governments should do more for public good and generate the revenues they need through taxation to fulfil their responsibilities, including to “provide multi-lateral organizations with enough resources to fulfil their missions” in order not to become dependent on private, unaccountable, funding (Unmüßig, 2017; see also Martens & Seitz, 2015).

Worries also extend to home-grown philanthropy, as local donors show a tendency to write off a social change approach and, so far, seem inclined to avoid human rights and social justice and stay away from advocacy work and civil society (Ambrose, 2005; “Homegrown Philanthropy”, 2014). As this issue will show, such observations are also of relevance to Southeast Asia.

### FOCUS ON AN OVERLOOKED REGION

This special issue of the *Austrian Journal for South-East Asian Studies* (ASEAS) highlights the unprecedented growth of institutionalized giving in Southeast Asia, a region rarely included in the global discussion of philanthropy, from both an academic and a practitioner’s perspective. In the opening overview article, I reflect on the evolving state of philanthropy in Southeast Asia driven by global and local factors and by often conflicting notions of charity, development, and business and ask “on whether institutionalized private giving combined or in substitution of public funding can help address developmental gaps or, at the very least, protect the most vulnerable groups”. (Sciortino, this issue, p. 139). Philanthropic trends and their implications are examined, including the decrease of presence and changing funding practices of international



foundations, the family-centered ‘indigenization’ of philanthropy, the advent of a business-oriented model of philanthropy, and the consolidation of faith-related giving. This analysis points to the need for a more emancipatory brand of Southeast Asian philanthropy if indeed it is to contribute to more inclusive and equitable development.

The other articles deepen the key issues signaled in the overview by providing cases of specific foundations and countries. More particularly, Mary S. Zurbuchen in her article on legacies of cultural philanthropy focuses on the Ford Foundation, one of the major international actor in the region because of its long-lasting field presence, volume of direct funding to local organizations, and support of home-grown philanthropy. In her paper, she briefly sketches the history of the Ford Foundation work in the arts and humanities in Asia and its sustained support for building capacity and knowledge. She shows the changes the program has undergone over time and how its most recent rendition may compromise the ‘unique leverage’ of a grant-making tradition that is implemented by staff and offices embedded in country contexts and enlightened by grounded insights.

The focus then shifts to country-specific contexts. Natalie Phaholyothin discusses the evolution of charitable giving in Thailand and how the increase in local giving does not necessarily imply a full transformation to full-fledged philanthropy. The philanthropic sector could, in her view, be best defined as “a home-grown repertoire of socially conscious forms of giving” (Phaholyothin, this issue, p. 185). Next, the early development of philanthropy, particularly corporate giving in Myanmar as a country with an entrenched culture of giving is explored by Cavelle Dove. She raises questions about such ‘generous’ practices and wonders whether they should be examined in the context of the failure of the state to pursue development objectives and provide social services to the population. Finally, two articles focus on Indonesia and the rise of Islamic philanthropy. Amelia Fauzia in her article positions Islamic philanthropy as part of broader social trends in Indonesian society, particularly modernization and Islamization, and reflects on whether faith-based philanthropy can play a role in supporting civil society and promoting social justice and a pluralist society. Hilman Latief reflects on similar issues from a somewhat different angle, by examining the operation of the main Islamic philanthropic foundation, Dompot Dhuafa and its overseas efforts in Hong Kong. Adding a theological dimension, the article shows how religious concepts are reinterpreted to meet development purposes and better serve underprivileged groups, in this case Indonesian migrant women workers residing in Hong Kong.

In closing, an interview is presented that gives a flavor of the new international philanthropic actors in Southeast Asia. Mary Joy Pigozzi, Executive Director of Educate a Child, an initiative of the Education Above All Foundation of Qatar speaks about the foundation’s efforts to reach out-of-school children of Southeast Asia. The issue also profiles SEA Junction, a knowledge center and public venue on Southeast Asia that has recently opened in Bangkok, Thailand and is founded collectively by so-called ‘founding partners’ who share the same vision and interest.

This initial work on philanthropy in Southeast Asia hopes to inspire more in-depth follow-up studies. Academic analysis and public scrutiny becomes more urgent now that philanthropic practices are expanding and gaining more relevance for development and growth. For future initiatives, other countries of Southeast Asia should be included and more attention given to technological giving practices through electronic platforms and crowd funding among other topics.

## EULOGY TO AN EARLY PRACTITIONER IN ASIA

Besides the desire to contribute to an emerging body of knowledge on philanthropy and development, our collective effort was sustained by the wish to pay tribute to a pioneer of international philanthropy in Asia. This issue is dedicated to Peter F. Geithner, who has played a key role in the Ford Foundation's programs and in the support for local philanthropy in the region and who died on July 2016 at the age of 84. Geithner started working at the Ford Foundation in the 1960s and in the course of its almost 30 year-employment acted as deputy representative for India in New Delhi, representative for Southeast Asia in Bangkok, as program officer for developing country programs, as the foundation's first representative for China, in Beijing, and as Regional Director of the Asia Programs in New York. He was also an adviser to other institutions with an interest in Asia including the Asia Center at Harvard University, the China Medical Board, the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (Sidel, 2017). In 2000, he provided inputs for the establishment of the Asia Office of the Rockefeller Foundation in Bangkok and in successive years he contributed to the formulation of the *Learning Across Boundaries in the Greater Mekong Subregion* (LAB) regional program (Sciortino, 2016).

The philanthropic model that Geithner represented and promoted operated through field offices staffed with program officers knowledgeable of the languages and socio-political dynamics in their coverage areas so as to be able to define and implement context-specific grant-making strategies responsive to local development priorities. The approach further emphasized building the individual and institutional capacity needed to address development challenges in priority sectors. In Southeast Asia, Geithner helped shape programs in rural development; community forestry; population and women's rights and sexual and reproductive health; governance and civil society, arts and humanities (as described in this issue by Zurbuchen); and peace and security (Geithner, 2008). In implementing the mission and values of the Ford Foundation, Geithner showed acumen and sensitivity:

In his own right, Peter was an extraordinary philanthropic programmer. He understood and deployed the catalytic role that an organization like Ford could play, with exquisite sensitivity to national priorities, customs and institutions. He worked both to build institutions, and to support and strengthen individual capacity, always making links between the two. His extraordinary ability to really listen to people, and his flexibility, integrity, political sense and the decentralized nature of Ford's work, made him the leading philanthropic programmer of his era in Asia of any nationality. Peter understood very early that philanthropy could build upon the long traditions of giving across Asia towards developing newer philanthropic institutions and practices. Long before most philanthropic colleagues, he deployed Ford assets to build philanthropic and non-profit institutions and infrastructure in the region. Today Asia is studded with foundations and non-profits and philanthropy has entered a period of rapid growth. These developments owe much to institutions at local, national and regional levels, for many of which Peter Geithner was the inspiration". (Sidel, 2017)



The contribution of Geithner is felt to this day through the many organizations he helped establish and the work of all those he inspired, as this issue dedicated to him testifies. I was among those who benefited from his mentoring when I became a Ford Foundation program officer in Indonesia and the Philippines and from his continued advice when regional director of the Rockefeller Foundation and later IDRC. Today, I and others who continue to share his vision and programming approach, miss his leadership as well as his advocacy of a philanthropy that is “responsive to differences”, that is “helpful to those who can make a significant contribution” in the target countries, and for which “humility and not hubris is necessary” (Geithner, 2008, p. 194). These are all values that can no longer be taken for granted in today’s climate as this issue’s articles indicate.



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